

Area North Committee - 25 July 2012

## 8. Supporting the Visitor Economy

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### Purpose of the Report

To update members on recent initiatives that support the visitor economy in Area North, and provide a forum for discussion. In addition there will be a presentation by officers from Tourism and the Tourist Information Service, giving an overview of their service to visitors and to the local tourism related business sector.

### Public Interest

Support for sustainable tourism remains a high priority within local community plans and is a priority for the Area North Committee. In a recent survey, visitors reported their top three reasons for visiting Somerset were:

1. The scenery
2. Plenty to see and do
3. Local heritage

Area North has a distinctive natural environment and a wealth of historic buildings and heritage sites, it is home to many craftsmen and artists and produces high quality, local produce.

This report provides some points of interest and food for thought. At the end, there is a suggested approach to further development, which Councillors are asked to consider and discuss. This helps the officers involved plan and implement further work.

### Recommendation

That members note and comment on the report and presentations.

### Background

Area North has a distinctive environment, including its historic buildings and natural environment. The National Trust properties, the networks of pathways for walking, cycling and riding, open spaces like Ham Hill and the River Parrett Trail are notable assets within the district. The Somerset Levels and Moors is a low wetland of international significance for bio-diversity and is home to a variety of programmes initiated by the RSPB and Natural England.

A Somerset Tourism visitor survey conducted in 2010 indicated that the local scenery and heritage are key reasons for people visiting the county. Visitors find it quite easy to get here, a large proportion coming down from the Midlands, and once they have stayed

in Somerset many people tend to return in following years. Key messages from the survey were that there is still great potential for growth and that our tourism offer needs to be customer focussed with emphasis on quality, while still providing good value for money.

In reviewing the priorities for Area North, following the election of the new Area North Committee in June 2011, councillors identified promoting the value of tourism to the local economy as a priority area of work. Area Development and Tourism officers have reviewed current activity and opportunities and a number of ideas considered, this report provides an opportunity for further discussion by councillors.

## Introduction

### The role of Government / local authorities in promoting the value of tourism.

Local authorities can support the tourism sector through support to local businesses, through providing or enabling quality local facilities and services, and through working in partnership at a national / regional or local level.

SSDC supports tourism through a number of services including:-

- **Economic Development (Tourism)** – including the Tourist Information Centres at Cartgate and in Yeovil and Visit South Somerset website [www.visitsouthsomerset.com](http://www.visitsouthsomerset.com)
- **Area Development** to support community led schemes to enhance local facilities / town centres, and to support the provision of local visitor information.
- **Countryside** – including Ham Hill Country Park and Langport Visitor Centre.
- **Streetscene** – maintaining open spaces, displays and street cleaning.
- **Planning** – policies & decision making to support the development of sustainable tourism.

At a national government level tourism is the responsibility of the Department of Culture, Media and Sport. (DCMS). Its work includes support to Visit Britain and Visit England, which act as policy bodies and commission national level marketing activity.

Somerset County Council supports tourism through its Economic Development service, including funding for the Visit Somerset website (managed by the Somerset Tourism Association).

The following sections provide some points of interest and food for thought. At the end, there is a suggested approach to further development of the tourism sector in Area North / district wide, which Councillors are asked to consider and endorse.

### Tourist and Local Information Centres (TIC / LIC)

In Area North there are four Local or Community Information Centres: Martock, Somerton, South Petherton and Langport. They are staffed by volunteers, providing a service to the local community and visitors and are great advocates for the area. They attend leaflet exchange and other events organised by the Tourism Service and maintain regular contact and support from Area North officers. **The LICs recorded over 11,000 visitors during April to October 2011, supported by around 80 volunteers.**

## **South Somerset Market Towns Investment Group**

Increasing the value of tourism to the local economy of the South Somerset market towns is a priority for this community partnership – where SSDC and local representatives work together to plan and implement a range of local initiatives.

One example of how MTIG has promoted tourism was to commission forty-two interpretation boards at Chard, Crewkerne, Ilminster, South Petherton, Ilchester, Martock, Somerton, Langport, Castle Cary, Bruton and Wincanton. The boards include a map of the whereabouts of the local services, from post offices to local walks, places of historical interest and museums, along with defining facts and photographs of the towns. The boards are unique to each town, flagging up the quirky sites and popular attractions of the area, like old coaching houses, wineries and lace mills.

More recently the market town representatives worked collaboratively to assess the quality of their visitor offer. Each town was assessed by a group of volunteers from the other market towns on the basis of pre-determined questions and an evaluative report was compiled for each town after the visit. An experienced tourism consultant analysed the results and created an action plan of improvements produced the final report. Each town was then able to apply for investment into priority schemes. Examples in Area North include additional benches, signage and visual enhancements to central areas.

## **The National Trust**

Area North has developed and maintains a working relationship with the National Trust. Of the 19 National Trust (NT) properties in Somerset, 8 are situated in South Somerset, seven are in Area North and the remaining property, Lytes Cary Manor is in Area East just a short distance from Somerton.

This year Barrington Court plays host to “The Field for the British Isles” by the artist Antony Gormley, a significant work of art from the national collection. This has attracted an unusually high number of visitors to the property; through Area North support, Local Information Centre volunteers have enjoyed a networking meeting at Barrington and were invited to the launch of the exhibition. In addition, Area North has supported visits by almost two hundred local school children.

Over recent years, Barrington Court has diversified the use of its farm buildings by taking a variety of craft businesses as tenants. There are a number of benefits in encouraging this sector which makes them ideal for this kind of location; impact on the structure of the buildings is minimal, the supply of raw materials doesn't require heavy traffic in a village location and they add an additional attraction for visitors while increasing their own market. The National Trust was recently successful in attaining a grant from the Local Action in Rural Communities (LARC) fund, to improve the farm building facilities; as part of the LARC executive, SSDC supported this application as a positive action for the rural visitor economy.

## **Local Action for Rural Communities – Levels and Moors**

Levels & Moors Local Action is a programme funded by the European Union to support the positive development of communities and businesses in specific rural areas through Local Action or community-led projects. £1.2m has been allocated for projects within the Levels and Moors area targeted at six key objectives including: Sustainable Tourism - to develop projects that encourage tourism to positively benefit the area and respecting the environment and character of the Levels & Moors

Examples of projects supported include: the Sustainable Tourism Project which created walk around guides for a number of towns in the Levels and Moors area and car-free itineraries for visitors; The Somerset Wildlife Trust and the RSPB both received funding for initiatives which ensure environmentally sensitive agreements are achieved with landowners, while improving the quality of experience for visitors; Somerset Art Works was supported to provide business development opportunities for local artists.

The LARC initiative has also supported individual arts, crafts and produce businesses in Area North including Barrington Pottery, Montacute Farmers Market, Moor Beer, Brown and Forrest Smokery.

With Area North support, Langport Town Council has recently achieved funding through LARC to improve access to their natural local environment. The project, “Walk Langport” aims to improve riverside and moorside pathways and to improve signage, so people are encouraged to use these walkways, enjoy the natural countryside and avoid the town traffic. Next stages of this project will consider improving all access pathways into the landscape with appropriate signage, interpretation and information.

### **Cultural Events and Activities**

Area North benefits from a diverse variety of events and festivals, including the Kingsbury May Fair and Party on the Parrett, the Somerton Arts Festival, the Green Scythe Fair, Lowland Games, and Steam Spectacular. A Walking Festival centred on Langport is now in its seventh year and this year SSDC supported a community cultural festival to add to the event. In South Petherton, the re-emergence of the Petherton Folk Festival has been supported through Area North funding and SSDC advice. While these events serve the local community, they attract visitors from further afield and promote the area as a desirable place to live and work.

The **River Parrett Trail** was an innovative project that stimulated community interest, creative response and raised the profile of a stretch of the county from Bridgwater down to the Dorset border. While it remains an example of good practice, its dependency on public sector partnerships for ongoing management has made it vulnerable to cuts in public spending. It continues to attract visitors for walking, bird watching and for its sites of historic significance. There are also a range of circular walks and locally promoted trails using the extensive footway network in Area North.

### **Recommended approach to increasing the value of tourism to the local economy in Area North**

**1. Use a community led approach.** Work with existing and assist emerging initiatives to ensure that development is embedded within the community and that SSDC investment from staff time supports, guides or helps to raise the profile of the work that is generated locally. This includes identifying external funding opportunities for investment.

**2. Continue to provide, develop and maintain local services for visitors.** Continue to support local communities, businesses, local attractions etc to improve the visitor offer. This includes our Service Level Agreements with Local Information Centres; the training and support to local businesses offered by the Tourism Service and encouraging local investment which may help extend stay or increase spend within the local economy.

**3. Identify light touch interventions that add value across Area North** – and the wider district - and help to join up the visitor offer locally. This includes reviewing – and developing – current local / district marketing activities. The MTIG programme has

commissioned 'Town Apps', and further use of QR codes is being explored. There is £20,000 allocated in the Area North capital programme for additional investment, based on this review.

### **Financial Implications**

None from this report.

### **Council Plan Implications**

#### **Focus One: Jobs:**

- Motivate and support business associations and act as a point of contact for businesses and partners. Improve communications with businesses so that we are supporting them in meeting their needs and not acting as a barrier.
- Provide targeted support for start-ups and small businesses and those with the aspiration to expand.
- Enhance the vitality of town centres ....

#### **Focus Two: Environment**

- Continue to deliver schemes with local communities that enhance the appearance of their local areas

### **Carbon Emissions & Adapting to Climate Change Implications (NI188)**

Development of sustainable tourism initiatives promotes reduced use of the car, through extended stay. Initiatives such as walking and cycling, are relatively low impact.

### **Equality and Diversity Implications**

Local tourism initiatives often promote improved accessibility, which supports people of all ages and abilities to use and enjoy the local landscape and activities.

**Background Papers:** None

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